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Farm Labor Campaign

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THE WOMEN'S LAND ARMY OF GREAT BRITAIN

The British Government has gone much farther in mobilization of the population for war purposes than any other of the United Nations. It has not only registered and drafted men, but it has also registered women between the ages of 18 and 45. It can direct any person to work anywhere, at the prevailing wage rate, at anything of which he is capable. Men have been "frozen" to essential jobs; women of the ages 20 to 24 have been called up and, with certain exceptions, if found unoccupied in work of national importance, have been given their choice among several vital wartime activities, one of these being the Women's Land Army.

To bring about a widespread employment of women it was necessary to effect a twofold change. On the one hand the farmers had to be led to pocket their prejudices, at least temporarily, and to adopt an experimental attitude toward the use of the labor of women. On the other hand, definite steps had to be taken to dignify the position of the woman worker in agriculture, so that service rendered on a full-time basis might be regarded as of equal merit with the service rendered by the women's auxiliaries in the armed services.

The British Women's Land Army was organized in January 1939, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries for the purpose of providing a force of farm workers that could be depended on for year-round service as contrasted with strictly seasonal labor, which was to be obtained from the Emergency Land Corps. It was desired that this force of regular farm workers should be an addition to those already in agriculture, consequently women already engaged in farming were not recruited. Candidates for enrollment are required to serve for the duration of the war unless released for special reasons; they must give full-time service in any part of England and Wales to which they may be sent. (The Scottish Women's Land Army operates independently.) Among the members are former teachers, cooks, mannequins, actresses, shop girls, office workers, and others. British farmers were slow to utilize the help of members of the Land Army, despite the fact that for a long time women had been extensively employed in dairying and seasonal work.

By the first of December 1939, 15,000 volunteers had signed up in the WLA but farmers had employed only 2,800. By August 1941 more than 14,000 were at work, and by September 1942 the number employed was 52,000.

(From mimeographed circular, Wartime Use of Women in Agriculture, issued by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, USDA.)

DISTRIBUTION - Sent to extension editors for primary information use in the States; and to War Boards and others for their information; coverage - all States.

USE - Adaptation and use in news and feature stories, on radio, house organs, visual aids, etc., and as background information for writers.

Organization

The organization of the British Women's Land Army consists of a national headquarters, situated at Balcombe, Sussex, which deals with general policy and administration, and a county organization consisting of a WLA office, directed by an organizing secretary, and a WLA committee of nine members. The local WLA committee works in cooperation with the county War Agricultural Committee, which is made up of representatives of farm landlords, farm operators, and farm laborers, and with the unions of agricultural laborers. Over the county there is a network of area and district representatives of the WLA.

Eligibility

Volunteers for the Women's Land Army must be between 17 and 40 years of age. They must be physically and temperamentally fit for hard work in the country. Before enrollment they are interviewed by two representatives of the WLA, and, if deemed acceptable, are requested to procure medical certificates showing fitness for work. Less than half of the applicants are accepted. Those who meet requirements are expected to continue their ordinary occupations until called for training or employment. Volunteers are trained as fast as there are demands for their services. This minimizes the idle time between completion of training and placement. Training, which is given at an agricultural college or on an approved farm, lasts for 4 weeks. During this period the registrants are given board and lodging plus a weekly allowance of 10 shillings, from which deductions for health and unemployment insurance are made. Land Army representatives visit trainees on farms and stand ready at all times to give advice and assistance.

Employment of WLA members is subject to the same laws, insurance requirements and conditions as other private employment. However, no WLA member is allowed to accept domestic work. Before placing a worker on a farm, a WLA representative makes a careful inquiry as to housing arrangements and the reputation of the farmer as an employer. Fares of workers are paid to the place of employment. Minimum wage rates are established, both for women of 18 or more years and for those from 16 to 18. The rates for the older group amount to not quite two-thirds of the rates paid regular adult male laborers, thus reflecting the opinions of farmers as to the relative capacity of the women workers. The usual work week is one of 48 hours. Special rates of pay are prescribed for overtime and Sundays. WLA workers may be housed by their employer, may be billeted in a home nearby or may live in groups in hostels fitted up for the purpose. After six months of employment a WLA worker is entitled to a week's leave to permit a trip home; however the convenience of the employer is consulted. Uniforms are furnished by the government. They include farm shirt and breeches, overcoat, green jersey, stockings, brown felt hat, heavy shoes, rubber boots, oil-skin, a red and green armlet and a badge. These items are renewed as required; they are intended to be practical working outfits.

In some few cases women workers are employed in mobile gangs made up of from six to twelve persons, who move from farm to farm by motor or with a threshing outfit, remaining in one situation for only long enough to meet the local need. Under such circumstances the WLA girls are billeted in private houses near each other and as near as possible to the farm on which they work.

The types of employment undertaken by WLA members fall into the following major classes:

1. All forms of farm work, such as dairy labor, care of livestock, field work, tractor driving, threshing.
2. Gardening, both for the market and for farm consumption.
3. Timber production under the Home Timber Production Department of the Ministry of Supply. For this work preliminary training is given at a forestry camp near Suffolk. WLA members are for the most part concerned with measurement of timber, checking for standards, delivery, yard management, etc.
4. Afforestation under the Forestry Commission.

The effectiveness of WLA members at their farm and forestry employments has been widely recognized. According to one record of the opinions of farmers on this subject, women do about as well as men in picking crops like peas, hops, beans, apples, cherries, and plums, and in caring for poultry. Their output falls off by about one-tenth at milking and at potato picking and sorting; at hoeing and weeding it is one-fifth less than that of men. At tractor driving, one of the popular jobs among WLA members, women turn out about three-quarters as much work as men, but when repair work is included, only half as much. In work with cattle and in operations with horse-drawn machinery, including plowing, harrowing, and carting, the women's output is about two-thirds that of men. At heavy work, such as binding and loading sheaves, loading potatoes, and spreading manure, women accomplish about half as much as men. For such work, however, they are seldom employed.

